

## Project Insights Report

# FUSION: Future Skills Innovation Network for Universities



### PARTNERS

Concordia University  
Simon Fraser University  
University of Calgary  
University of Saskatchewan  
Carleton University  
Memorial University of Newfoundland



### LOCATIONS

Across Canada



### INVESTMENT

\$2,500,000



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### CONTRIBUTORS

Laura McDonough

## Executive Summary

The Future Skills Innovation Network (FUSION), a partnership among six Canadian universities, was established to respond to employer concerns about gaps in social and emotional skills among graduates entering the workforce. The program focused on building metacognition (awareness or understanding of one's own thinking), communication and problem-solving skills through flexible, experiential and reflective learning delivered in co-op programs across humanities, social sciences and STEM disciplines. With an emphasis on equity, the initiative also sought to engage underrepresented groups and included innovative approaches such as Indigenous innovation labs.

Of the 2,517 students enrolled, 1,785 completed the program. Surveys revealed that over three-quarters of respondents were employed or pursuing further education or training upon completion, and students reported greater ability to identify and transfer acquired skills to academic and work settings. Self-assessments indicated accelerated skill development compared to traditional co-op programs, while inter-university collaboration improved the scale and effectiveness of implementation despite challenges with integrating systems and collecting consistent data.

The findings underscore the growing importance of social and emotional skills in a rapidly changing labour market where automation is reshaping technical roles and employers increasingly value adaptability, collaboration and problem solving. FUSION not only demonstrated that skill-based programming can be effectively scaled across institutions but also offered a model of knowledge-sharing and inter-institutional collaboration that can strengthen postsecondary education outcomes and contribute to building a more resilient workforce in Canada.

#### KEY INSIGHTS

- 1** One thousand seven hundred eighty-five (41%) out of a total of 2,517 who enrolled in the course completed FUSION at one of the partner universities (completion rates ranged from 64% to 83% across the partner institutions).
- 2** Students reported they were better able to identify the skills they acquired through the FUSION program and articulate to future employers how applying the skills improved their academic performance.
- 3** A commitment to the “radical sharing” of knowledge among the partner universities was credited with improving pace, scale and effectiveness of the project.

## The Issue

Opinion surveys indicate that employers in Canada attach considerable importance to social and emotional skills, particularly among younger workers coming out of high school or postsecondary education into their first job. Survey results also suggest that employers believe that many graduates coming from postsecondary institutions are not adequately prepared with these social and emotional skills. Yet these skill sets are viewed as increasingly important in helping people to adapt more effectively and more quickly to change in the workplace.



## What We Investigated

FUSION brings together six Canadian universities (Concordia University, Simon Fraser University, University of Calgary, University of Saskatchewan, Carleton University and Memorial University) to experiment with new ways to help students develop work-related skills in three areas in high demand by employers: metacognition, communication and problem solving. The six participating universities came together to address common problems around the skills-based gap that students were seen to be challenged by, as well as to scale and replicate the most effective approaches across institutions. These approaches were delivered through each of the universities' co-op programs across humanities, social sciences and STEM fields.

The program explored whether some aspects of co-op programs could be delivered in an asynchronous environment that emphasized practical aspects of learning and gave opportunities for guided reflection.

The partners were also interested in seeing if the quality of implementation of the program could be optimized through knowledge exchange within the participating universities. All throughout the program, FUSION partners across the six institutions communicated regularly, exchanging information, results and best practices.

The curriculum was designed with flexible delivery in mind and with a focus on creating experiential learning activities. Delivered in interactive, self-directed modules, FUSION encouraged students to apply acquired skills to transfer to future work through a process of self-reflection and feedback from instructors. Funding from the Future Skills Centre supported piloting of the curriculum as well as continuous improvement through knowledge exchange among the partner institutions.

FUSION also aimed to improve postsecondary education outcomes for students from underrepresented groups. Of the 693 students who self-identified, 50% identified as women, 23% as racialized, 8% as newcomers, 7% as persons with disabilities or deaf persons, and 0.1% as Indigenous. This was achieved by program partners reaching out to on-campus equity advocates and Indigenous groups.

Indigenous innovation labs were held at the University of Saskatchewan and Memorial University in fall term 2021. These labs were special courses designed to blend Indigenous knowledge and established innovation lab practices, and were targeted at undergraduate students.

## **What We're Learning**

FUSION used student self-assessments to report that participating students were able to develop skills at an accelerated pace compared to the regular co-op programs/courses on offer. Pre- and post-intervention self-assessments indicated perceived gains across the three main skills domains: metacognition, communication and problem solving. Seventy-seven percent of participants reported themselves as either employed or enrolled in further education/training upon completing the program.

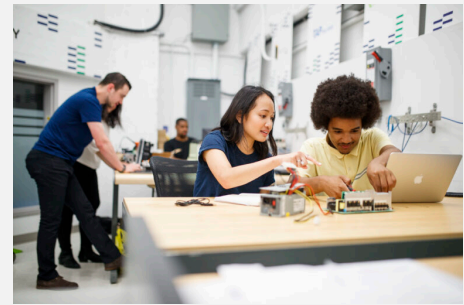
The sample sizes used were insufficient to generate statistical conclusions. FUSION's project team noted other forms of verification would be needed to develop a more robust picture of the program's impact. Potential additional data could be collected from consultations with employers participating in these programs.

FUSION partner institutions reported that this collaborative project enhanced the knowledge and capacities of partner institutions in delivering skill-based learning. They also pointed to the project as instrumental in improving the pace, scale and effectiveness of the initiatives implemented in each university. That said, inter-university collaboration posed some challenges as well. For example, it became difficult to integrate learning content into each institution's learning management system. This made it difficult to capture trace and assessment data.

## **Why It Matters**

Social and emotional skills have always been important, but they are rapidly becoming essential to the future of work in Canada. As automation transforms the future of manual and technical labour, social and emotional skills are essential because many jobs require more collaboration among workers, and soft skill acquisition helps to show employers that workers are able to do this effectively. While technical skills remain important, many are being automated, and employers need workers to fill jobs that require mastery of several social and emotional skills that cannot be replicated by AI.

In addition to the skills themselves, this project provides a model for how universities can collaborate to develop and implement programming that benefits a wide range of students. This type of collaboration is critical to fostering the resilient workforce Canada needs.



### **State of Skills: Enhancing Career Prospects and Well-Being for Canadian Youth**

To stem the recent downturn in labour market conditions of youth and to lay the groundwork for them to play a pivotal role in fostering growth and inclusion, it is imperative to address and dismantle the multiple and intersectional barriers they encounter.

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Have questions about our work? Do you need access to a report in English or French? Please contact [communications@fsc-ccf.ca](mailto:communications@fsc-ccf.ca).

### **How to Cite This Report**

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